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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LISBON 001845

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PO](#) [IR](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: PORTUGAL'S FOREIGN MINISTER MEETS WITH SYRIAN
INFORMATION MINISTER

Classified By: Acting Pol/Econ Couns Cari Enav for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d).

Summary

11. (C) On August 29, the Foreign Minister's Diplomatic Advisor provided Charge d'Affaires with a read-out of Foreign Minister Amado's August 24 meeting with Syrian Information Minister Mohsen Bilal. Bilal asserted that the Middle East needed to be "reengineered" from the inside and that anything imported or imposed was unacceptable. He reiterated Syria's well-known stance that Israel was the stumbling block to resolving the Middle East's woes. Bilal did not deny that Syria maintained an active diplomatic and political dialogue with Iran, but asserted that Syria promoted the more moderate segments of the Palestinian and Iranian societies. Bilal further noted that Syria's isolation was only strengthening Iran's influence in the Muslim world. Amado underscored that the region's solution would need to be solved by looking at the issues strategically, not from an historical perspective. Clearly, Amado asserted, Iran was not the solution. Syria considered itself a "defender of Lebanese reconciliation" and opposed troop deployment along its border, primarily because it was a French proposal." End Summary.

Background

12. (C) On August 29, the Foreign Minister's Diplomatic Advisor Paulo Lourenco provided Charge d'Affaires O'Neal with a read-out of Foreign Minister Amado's August 24 meeting with Syrian Information Minister Mohsen Bilal. Lourenco noted that Amado had accepted the Syrian meeting request - passed to the FM during his August 22 visit to Cairo - because it was important to hear the Syrian viewpoint, particularly in light of Portugal's commitment to contribute to UNIFIL. He commented that the Israeli air strikes had agitated Syria by bolstering Iran's standing in the region and further weakened the Syrian regime which suffered from internal turmoil. Lourenco also noted that over the last few weeks, Syrian officials had met with Italian PM Prodi, the Spanish FM, a German official, as well as with officials in Valletta and Larnarca.

Israel the Main Stumbling Block

13. (C) Bilal asserted that the Middle East needed to be "reengineered" from the inside and that anything imported or imposed was unacceptable. He reiterated Syria's well-known stance that Israel was the stumbling block to resolving the Middle East's woes and underscored that there could be no comprehensive solution without the return of the Golan Heights. Bilal explained that Israel had secretly signaled a willingness to resume negotiations, commenting that Israel

had "bought peace with Egypt and Jordan, and that now it was time to buy peace with Syria."

¶4. (C) Amado insisted that Syria had to recognize Israel and that any resumption of fighting would be unacceptable and extremely detrimental. In response to Bilal's comment that Syria had acknowledged Israel in 1967, Amado countered that Syria needed to explicitly recognize the country.

Iran's Increasing Influence

¶5. (C) Bilal commented that Iran was clearly a powerful player in the region, benefiting from its more advanced economy, from Arab disunity, and from the recent conflict in Lebanon. He did not deny that Syria maintained an active diplomatic and political dialogue with Iran, but asserted that Syria promoted the more moderate segments of the Palestinian and Iranian societies. He underscored that Syria did not support Al-Qaeda but implied that Syria had problems with its own extremists, which it could not resolve on its own.

¶6. (C) Amado underscored that the region's solution would need to be solved by looking at the issues strategically, not from an historical perspective. Clearly, he asserted, Iran was not the solution. Amado emphasized the need to bring all the Middle East parties together, and that Syria could play a constructive role by working more consistently through fewer channels of communications. Amado criticized Assad's recent comments as "destructive" and urged Syria to play a more positive role in the region.

And Syria's Increasing Isolation

¶7. (C) Bilal noted that Syria's isolation was only

LISBON 00001845 002 OF 002

strengthening Iran's influence in the Muslim world. He commented that the Syrian government was trying to hold itself together, but that things were getting worse. Regional animosity was increasing, and the Israeli strikes had only strengthened the radicals. Assad, whom Bilal characterized as more flexible than himself, was seeking rapprochement through the Barcelona Process (acknowledging that the process had evolved since its inception).

Defender of Lebanese Reconciliation

¶8. (C) With regard to Lebanon, Bilal commented that Syria was "a defender of reconciliation." However, the recent events in Lebanon had strengthened Iran's influence, making Hezbollah even more problematic to the reconciliation effort. Bilal underscored that Syria would consider troop deployment along its border as "a provocation" because of the strong "emotional and family-like bond" it shared with the Lebanese. When pressed by Amado, Bilal admitted that Syria opposed troop deployment along its border because it was a French idea.

Comment

¶9. (C) Paulo Lourenco characterized the meeting as a "Syrian cry for help." He noted that Iran's regional influence both fascinated and scared Syria which felt an increasing discomfort with its world standing. It appeared to him that the Syrian regime was looking for a way to hold onto power and impede Iran's growing influence. Lourenco underscored that Amado's meeting with Bilal did not signal a departure of Portugal's commitment to maintaining pressure on Syria and that Portugal remained a staunch ally in the war against terror. However, Amado felt it was important to hear Syria's thinking as Portugal prepared to contribute troops to UNIFIL in this very volatile region. Lourenco dismissed any notion of Portugal freelancing or lack of solidarity with the US position on rogue states. "When the chips are down," he commented, "it is clear who we stand with."

